

Poughkeepsie Journal
Tuesday, November 5, 2002

Public can pitch river projects

Ideas would be linked to cleanup

By Dan Shapley
Poughkeepsie Journal

For 40 years, Bob Menger, an avid fisherman, has avoided the Hudson River because of the health threat posed by PCBs and other pollutants.

"I like to fish where I can eat the fish, that's the main reason," the Wappingers Falls resident said. "I like the sport of it, but I like to eat them, too."

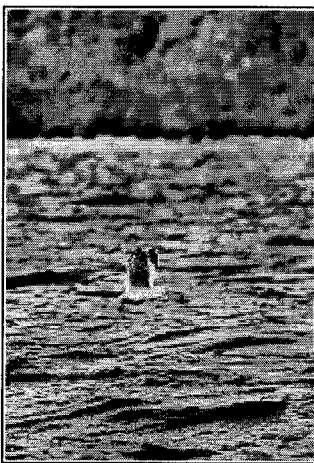
But in another 40 years, fishermen could be plucking fresh-caught fish from the river, and plopping them on docks built by General Electric Co.

That is the type of vision a coalition of state and federal agencies -- known as the Hudson River Trustees -- is charged with making a reality.

And now is the time for the public to pitch their own visions to the trustees, who will first identify habitat and resources damaged by PCB pollution and then develop projects that could compensate the public for the damage.

Under the government's plan, GE would be liable for the expense of the work because the company allowed PCBs to be discharged into the river at its upper-Hudson plants. GE and the Environmental Protection Agency also are cooperating on a \$500 million dredging project to remove PCB pollution lingering in the river bottom north of Albany. GE also is liable for the cost of the dredging.

GE wants joint effort



Spencer Ainsley/Journal
A seagull hovers over the turbulent surface of the Hudson River late last week near the west end of Dutchess Avenue in the City of Poughkeepsie looking toward Highland.

GE, which discharged PCBs into the Hudson for decades until the 1970s, wants to work with the government, spokesman Mark Behan said.

"Our hope is that we'll have an opportunity to participate in the process, and that the trustees will use both the very best science and common sense in pursuing their process," Behan said.

"It's not a vendetta against GE or anything. It's a matter of being in charge of protecting the public resources," said Joseph Steinbacher, an environmental toxicology and injury assessment expert with the National Oceanographic & Atmospheric Administration's Damage Assessment Center.

In addition to NOAA, the trustees include the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The restoration projects could take any number of forms -- from removing a dam on a tributary to encouraging spawning fish or removing invasive plant species that choke out native wildlife. It also could include projects such as cleaning up a blighted waterfront factory or building a fishing dock.

Residents have until Nov. 29 to review the trustees' Hudson River Natural Resource Damage Assessment Plan -- and recommend projects they would like to see the trustees undertake.

Already hundreds of projects have been suggested, including dozens that would affect the mid-Hudson Valley.

But few projects related to waterfront revitalization are on the list, even though virtually every community in the area has a plan and is looking for help. Few, if any, municipal officials attended a recent presentation in Poughkeepsie by the trustees.

"There hasn't been much discussion," Tivoli Mayor Marc Molinaro said of potential trustee projects.

Tivoli is working to gain access to a four-acre stretch of waterfront, where it envisions public docks and eventually a ferry connecting Saugerties, Kingston, Rhinecliff and Tivoli.

After learning more about the trustees, Molinaro said he was interested in seeing if the restoration projects could benefit Tivoli.

"Whenever there is an effort to find ways to improve access and maintain a balance of the natural environment of the Hudson River and our desire to use it both passively, recreationally and economically, I think we should find ways to do it," he said.

Flora Jones, a Beacon resident who attended the trustees' recent public meeting in Poughkeepsie, said she sees each living thing in and around the river -- including people -- as connected.

"It's all inclusive," she said, noting her biggest concern is fishermen who use the Hudson River, especially those who don't read English and may not know of the state's fishing advisories.

A sign of the damage

The state's health advisories against eating much of the Hudson's fish is the clearest example of the damage done by PCB pollution -- and one of the only damages proved worth compensating for at this point.

PCBs are thought to cause cancer and other serious health problems if consumed, so people have been advised to refrain from eating some species of fish or to eat only limited amounts.

Simple, right? Fish are unsafe. People can't eat fish.

Not so simple, said Sharon Brooks, an associate economist for the state Department of Environmental Conservation's Natural Resources Damages Unit.

"You can go to the store and buy a baloney sandwich, but you can't easily value a fishing experience," Brooks said.

One of Brooks' jobs is to answer questions like: What is the value of feeling sun on the face during a fishing trip, of eating your own catch? Many potential damages are even more complicated -- both to assess and to choose appropriate compensation.

"If you have an injury to turtles, what is the appropriate compensation for that?" asked Thomas Brosnan, an ecologist with NOAA's Damage Assessment Center.

The goal is to first study the natural resources that could have been damaged, then identify projects that compensate the public for those damages, even if a specific project doesn't directly relate to the specific damaged resource.

"If it's a matter of waterfront revitalization, those things can be addressed," Steinbacher said.

Logging on

For information about the Natural Resource Damage Assessment, visit the National Oceanographic & Atmospheric Administration Web site at www.darp.noaa.gov/neregion/hudsonr.htm

Where to write

To comment on the proposed plan, write to Steven Sanford, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, 625 Broadway, 5th Floor, Albany, NY 12233-4756.

AT A GLANCE

FISH ADVISORY

The state Department of Health recommends limiting the consumption of fish and other marine species caught in the Hudson River and other state waters because of chemical contamination.

Because of PCBs -- and in the case of blue crabs, also cadmium -- the state recommends the following guidelines for marine species caught in the stretch of the Hudson River south of the bridge at Catskill:

- Children younger than 15, and women of child-bearing age should eat nothing from the Hudson River. The only exception is American shad.
- For others, most species should be eaten no more than once per month. Exceptions include gizzard shad, which should not be eaten at all, and American shad, which can be eaten more frequently. The state recommends eating no more than six blue crabs per week.

Logging on

For detailed information or information about eating marine species from other parts of the river or other waters in the state, visit the state Department of Health's Web site at: www.health.state.ny.us/nysdoh/environ/fish.htm

AT A GLANCE

POSSIBLE PROJECTS

The following have been proposed as potential restoration projects the Hudson River Trustees could recommend to compensate the public for damages from PCB pollution to the Hudson River. The Hudson River Trustees stress this is a preliminary list of projects suggested by the public and has not been reviewed. There have been hundreds of suggestions. The following represent a sampling of those with local impact:

- Protect North Tivoli Bay from invasive plant species and reduce excess nutrients entering the bay from tributaries.

- Remove old dams or construct fish ladders that would bypass obstructions like dams in Hudson River tributaries, including those on many streams in Dutchess and Ulster counties.
 - Clean up area and develop riverfront access in Fishkill.
 - Clean up abandoned brownfields in the mid-Hudson.
 - Protect farmland in the Hudson Valley.
 - Reduce runoff from farms.
 - Restore wetlands and shoreline at Beacon Landing.
 - Create new links in the Hudson River Valley Greenway trail.
 - Add parcels to expand the Minnewaska State Park Preserve.
 - Build an environmental education outreach center on the Esopus Creek.
-